Protest against Dominant Socio-Cultural Norms

Shrinking Space for Voluntary Organisations

The experience of some NGOs reveals a gradual shrinking of space for rights-related work and any form of protest against mainstream cultural and social norms. Such organisations, especially those working on gender or sexuality-based discrimination, are becoming increasingly vulnerable to attacks from several quarters. It remains to be seen whether progressive groups and individuals are able to see the pattern and come together. But feminist groups, as well as many men, are increasingly joining hands in this struggle.

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It is an oft-repeated truism that the nature of polity in India is undergoing rapid changes. While this may be true throughout the length and breadth of the country, it is perhaps the most evident in the northern states, where rapidly changing political alignments have put the development and rights issues of the marginalised on the back-burner. In what may be seen as a parallel to the state losing interest in development and rights issues, the voluntary sector, or if I may be permitted to call them civil society organisations, have gained increasing credibility and importance in stepping into those shoes left vacant. It is difficult to think of a World Bank-financed project, or for that matter any government programme in the social sector which does not include a very visible NGO component.

Likewise, in all national and international deliberations regarding policy formulation NGOs have emerged as a strong voice representing people’s concerns. Even regional- and state-level consultations on policy and programme matters rarely take place without NGO participation, even though token. It may thus be justifiably argued that the voluntary sector, or the NGO sector, has finally ‘arrived’.

This credibility and acceptance of the NGO as a valid actor in the development sector has not come without a price. It is now fashionable to comment about the ‘mushrooming of NGOs’ when the discussion veers towards them. And just like the maligned mushrooms grow after a smart early monsoon shower, it has become fashionable to start NGOs after the floodgates of government funding have been opened. Individuals from diverse backgrounds and persuasions have started registering trusts and societies — would-be politicians, discredited ones, over-the-hill bureaucrats, unemployed youth, entrepreneurs without capital, government institutions and projects religious bodies — the list is endless. It is but natural that in this state of NGO formation many black sheep have surfaced, leading to another new phenomenon, that of blacklisting. It is interesting to note that the very same government agencies, which after careful scrutiny decide to allocate the grants, soon realise that the organisation exists either on paper on in the imagination of its founders. Newspapers, too, seem to have gleefully taken up the cause of ‘NGO bashing’.

My purpose in this article is not to defend NGOs in general or plead their innocence, but draw the attention of the reader to a particular phenomenon that seems to be gaining ground in the northern states, especially UP. The experience of seven or eight organisations reveals a gradual shrinking of space for rights-related work and any form of protest against mainstream cultural and social norms. Everyone is aware of the struggles of the Narmada Bachao Andolan and how the state has repeatedly struck down on its struggle for existence. The cases I wish to discuss are much smaller in significance but elaborate how such organisations are becoming increasingly vulnerable to attack even from the so-called traditionally supporting groups like the media, other NGOs and even advocacy-oriented funding groups.

I would first like to draw the attention of the reader to five separate incidents that have occurred in the past two years. Many might be familiar with some of these. But they illustrate my thesis on NGO vulnerability, which I will discuss later.

Vanangana is a women’s organisation working in Karvi, district Chitrakoot, in the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh. Among its various activities, Vanangana is involved in working with women in a World Bank-supported water and sanitation project, in savings credit groups with women and so on. In early 1999, they started a programme of developing awareness in the region on the issue of violence against women. Through cultural programmes they spread awareness on the issue, going from village to village. Soon they were swamped with women and their natal families seeking support. It is around this time that the wife of a local dairy official came to Vanangana with her own story of battery and repeated sexual violation of her 11-year-old daughter by her husband. Vanangana immediately decided to support her and together with colleagues from a Varanasi-based group, SARC, decided to provide anonymous shelter to this woman and her children. This is when all hell broke loose. The offending dairy official immediately took the matter to court complaining that workers from these two NGOs had abducted his wife and children. FIRs were lodged and arrest warrants issued. The four workers who had arrest warrants in their name had to go underground for two months. He also threatened the other workers of the organisation by brandishing an unlicensed revolver at them. A local organisation claiming to uphold the sanctity of the region (Chitrakoot being mythologically related to the ‘vanavas’ of Rama) claimed that this was not possible in such a holy place, and supported this person. The local media joined in, and it was stated that a brahmin could never commit such a sin. The district magistrate went on camera and said that even if such things happen it is best not to create such a public furore because these are private matters. But the women’s groups stood their ground and finally Jagdish Pandey was arrested (but he was granted bail soon, and joined work the day after his release), public opinion was mobilised, and the crime of child sexual abuse established, at least in the popular realm. Details about this case have been reported in EPW.

The dust had not settled in the valleys and ravines of Bundelkhand, when the news broke of the arrest 11 workers of Sahayog in April 2000. Sahayog had been working in UP, particularly in the hill districts, for over eight years and had been...
raising the issues of dalit development and women’s empowerment. The immediate cause for the arrest was the publication of a study report on AIDS seven months earlier. There was a tremendous local media frenzy about this report on the risk of spreading of HIV in the erstwhile hill districts of UP (now Uttaranchal). The offices of the organisation were ransacked, the workers beaten up by the police and even the National Security Act (NSA) applied on four workers. The local judiciary denied bail and this was finally received from the high court when the NSA was revoked. The entire incident generated a huge media debate, and even responsible national dailies went to the extent of supporting the harsh state action. Fortunately for Sahayog, the imposition of NSA was a rallying point for human rights activists around the country and this created a pressure that enabled their release from jail. Reports on the Sahayog event were carried in almost all major newspapers and magazines of the country.

Around the time that the workers of Sahayog were being granted bail it came to light that workers of a group called Rihai from the Shivpuri district of MP had been illegally incarcerated for over three months. Women’s groups and activists in UP were now acutely aware of the vulnerability of NGOs and decided to investigate. It was found that two women and a man from this NGO were jailed on extremely flimsy pretexts, beaten up and then raped in police custody allegedly by no other than the district collector. Bail was somehow arranged after three months. But Gayatri’s (one of the women who was allegedly jailed and raped in custody) complaints about the rape were not only dismissed locally, but also by the state human rights commission. Instead, questions were raised about her character, and there was public extolling of the virtues of the district collector by caste-based local groups. Meanwhile, the police nearly razed Gayatri’s house and a small eating place belonging to her family to the ground.

On May 16, 2001, the kol tribals of Narkoti village, in Chandauli district in eastern UP were holding a meeting on raising tendu leaf collection charges, when their meeting was broken up by a posse of policemen, who came in firing in the air. There was a brief exchange of fire with some political activists who also had firearms. The police returned a few hours later and picked up some villagers. They returned again on May 18 and beat up the villagers. They then selectively arrested villagers, including workers from the local NGO Gramya. These people are still in jail, arrested allegedly for being Naxalites. Gramya is involved in working on the development and rights of tribals in the district. It had earlier led a big protest movement against the trafficking of girls from the women’s protection home in Varanasi. This campaign had been a setback for many local mainstream political leaders who had been involved in the trafficking.

The citizens of Lucknow woke up on July 8, 2001 to the sensational news-story about of how the police had raided a gay club involved in pornography and arrested the main players. The newspapers were awash with the exploits of the police cultural guardians of the city. It slowly emerged that the group involved, Bharosa and its associate Naz Foundation International, were engaged in AIDS-related awareness work. The four people arrested were involved in working with AIDS prevention, particularly among the gay community. As in all earlier cases the lower courts were prompt in denying bail, and then the usual route of going to the high court had to be adopted. Mainstream NGOs in Lucknow were very reluctant in coming out in support because they felt this was a gay group, but finally the women’s groups were able to mobilise support and a public protest meeting was held. The four arrested workers finally got out of jail on the August 23 a full six weeks after their arrest.

There are NGOs and NGOs. Some are involved in implementing government-mandated projects, on water and sanitation, family planning and so on. There are others which are think tanks and research groups, still others choose to defend the rights of the weak and marginalised. While all NGOs are vulnerable financially and are forever trying to secure grants for their work, the last group described is especially vulnerable in many more ways. If one goes over the cases described above the NGOs were all working with vulnerable groups and on rights and entitlement issues (Table).

A quick study will reveal that the government of India is a signatory to international treaties and conventions that uphold these rights, but unfortunately the behaviour of the state at a local level totally belies its international positions. Majority communities are also becoming increasingly intolerant to all kinds of perceived threats to their communal, racial, class, caste, gender and heterosexual hegemonies. These attitudes also get reflected in different ways in the general community, media, funding organisations as well as the way the NGO communities have reacted.

Vulnerability to the arms of the state: This aspect is clearly illustrated in all these cases. The role of the police in assuming cultural guardianship is clear in the Karvi, Sahayog and, of course, in the Bharosa case. The local administration has repeatedly expressed its inability to protect the interests of these activists in the Sahayog case in the face of what they called public opinion and outrage. The NGOs and activists have uniformly taken a non-violent stand, but the outburst against them has nearly always been violent. Jagdish Pandey roamed around in Karvi brandishing a revolver, hobnobbing all the while with the police; the anti-socials in Almora were smashing up the Sahayog office in front of police officials; and the brutality in Narkoti village in Chandauli has left behind a trail of injuries among young and old, men and women. The local administration has been unsympathetic and even vengeful. The district magistrate in Karvi went on camera to reveal his insensitiveness, the DM at Almora still refuses to clarify his stand on Section 133. The collector at Shivpuri demonstrated his power by allegedly raping Gayatri. The legal system, which is supposed to be the last recourse to justice and the defender of the rights of the weak and aggrieved, has been manipulated to lodge FIRs that need a wild imagination to frame – that of attempted murder in the case of Gayatri and her colleagues and for the Gramya activists, that of sedition and threat to national security for the Sahayog activists. The lower judiciary has had a uniform response to bail applications – that of rejection. This is a ploy that the police are using in connivance with the judiciary to harass these NGO workers for as long as possible.

Vulnerability to mainstream political parties and their leaders: The state

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<th>Organisation</th>
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machinery is a puppet in the hands of the political masters and thus state action is clearly being orchestrated by these puppet masters. In the Karvi and Sahayog cases the local political leadership made strong statements against the organisations, in the Rihai case the district collector enjoyed obvious political support in his vendetta against Gayatri and Rihai. The Gramya case reeks of political revenge and is a punishment for having taken up the issue of trafficking in which political leaders were implicated, and political silence in the Bharosa case is remarkable and justifies the adage — silence is consent.

**Vulnerability to media reporting:** The Sahayog case was perhaps entirely a creation of the media. The NSA was applied to the workers when they had already been jailed on the very first day of the protest. The local media gave birth to a vicious cycle of virulent reporting, where they would report one bout of frenzy in such a manner that it would lead to further frenzy, which would again be reported in painstaking detail and on went the cycle. In the Bharosa case, which also dealt with a sexuality issue, the media reacted to the news like it does to a juicy sex scandal. Later on it toned down considerably, but much damage had been done. The local reporters in Karvi, Shivpuri and Varanasi have usually reflected local prejudices while the state-level press has been more responsible. In the Sahayog case, even the national media was undecided in its approach.

**Vulnerability to majority communities:** It was argued during the Sahayog debate that as an NGO it should have at least got the support of the community, after working with them for eight years. But this argument is based on the assumption that the work of these NGOs/activists does not upset the current class, caste, gender and communal power equations. Rights-related work can never be neutral and the powerful in the community react when their interests are threatened. In the Bharosa case, a few of the arrested workers were Muslims and there seemed to be an unsaid ISI-related implication hanging in the air. The brahmin-mafia lobby in Jageswar was looking out for an opportunity to get Sahayog out of the area (after many previous attempts had failed) and they seized this opportunity with both hands. The brahmin lobby in Karvi was steadfast in its support for Jagdish Pandey, organising protests and demonstrations. It has been much easier to organise support for these groups in cities like Lucknow, Bhopal or Delhi than in Karvi, Almora or Shivpuri, which clearly highlights their geographical vulnerability as well.

**Vulnerability from peer (NGO) isolation:** The NGO community in the states concerned, that is, UP, MP and Uttarakhand has displayed a strangely timid attitude in these cases. During all these incidents there have been a large group of NGOs and even networks that have condemned the organisation concerned. Most of the groups working on AIDS and on health have not been forthcoming at all in supporting either Sahayog or Bharosa, where AIDS-related work was at the centre of the controversy. In the Karvi case NGOs went on record supporting family values in spite of clear evidence of child sexual abuse and domestic violence. Most NGOs in MP created such a distance between themselves and Rihai that women’s groups in UP had to respond to its plight.

**Vulnerability to funding arbitrariness:** The National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) is the umbrella organisation which coordinates the state-funded AIDS programme in the country. It went out of its way to condemn Sahayog even though Sahayog was not a part of its programme. Bharosa also got no support from either NACO or its state counterpart State AIDS Control Societies (SACS) even though these organisations provide funding support for working on AIDS awareness with gay communities. These very people had also been called upon many times by the state AIDS cell to act as resource persons in their programmes. The work of Rihai was supported through an individual fellowship to Gayatri through a non-governmental advocacy group called Samarthan. The chief functionary of Samarthan, a noted NGO functionary, not only refuted Gayatri’s rape as being imaginary, but withdrew financial support. In the Sahayog case, Action Aid, a non-governmental funding organisation which claims to have a rights-based advocacy approach, notified the organisation about terminating its funding with a letter that came five months later.

**Facing the Challenges**

The discussion above clearly outlines the difficulties that these organisations have had to face in working with genuine issues of health, rights and deprivation of the marginalised communities. While some form of resistance is anticipated, the adverse reaction from the peer NGO community and the so-called sensitive funding community has been a new dimension. But one positive aspect of the entire struggle for securing the rights of the marginalised is that there has been a coalescence of different groups and activists. New coalitions have formed and these include actors from diverse sectors. There have been some progressive individuals and organisations from among the media, general community, legal fraternity, fund providers who have shown exceptional courage and determination in openly defending the actions of these organisations, and hopefully their numbers will increase. It is with the encouragement of these supporters that all these organisations are still determined to carry their work forward.

The manner in which dominant socio-cultural ideologies have permeated all forms of public action and discourse in the northern states is very disturbing, to say the least. The intolerance of all forms of the ‘other’ is increasingly manifesting itself in attacks on vulnerable groups, and the vast majority giving tacit support through a deafening silence. Civil society organisations have now become the new targets because they are one of the few vehicles to slow and perhaps reverse the rapid socio-cultural homogenisation process. The unfortunate scenario, which has emerged of late, is that so many different actors within society have internalised the rhetoric of ‘our cultural heritage’ that it is no longer described as obscurantist. This ideology is not just status quoist, but intends to perpetuate and strengthen all forms of class, caste, religion, gender and sexuality-based discriminations. Class-based discriminations have long been the issue for political struggle and caste politics is the new phenomenon in Indian polity. Unfortunately, all those working on gender-based or sexuality-based discriminations remain extremely vulnerable, those working on the second group of issues even more so. The attacks on the NGOs in the last two years reflect this vulnerability. It remains to be seen whether progressive groups and individuals are able to see the pattern and come together. One major obstacle that has to be overcome is that of confronting our own sexual values and codes. It has been a long struggle in which class and caste-based values and assumptions were challenged and new egalitarian values accepted (though perhaps not practised in their entirety). In the case of gender, the struggle is still ongoing, but sexuality promises to be the last battle, and it is not going to be overcome easily. The one silver lining is that feminist groups have been increasingly getting together in this struggle and many men have also started joining hands.